

Study Questions on Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*.
Princeton University Press, 2006.

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PART I: MORALLY EVOLVED

What are the two ways of interpreting social contract theory and what is wrong with both of them?

FdW: The historical interpretation posits the real existence of an asocial group of humans who rationally decide to enter society. Even the Rawlsian thought experiment version ignores the biological reality of humans as "obligatorily gregarious." We never "became" social; we've always been social. We were never independent and equal; we have always been "interdependent, bonded, and unequal."

JP: this isn't exactly fair to Rawls, though it gets to an important issue. Rawls is perfectly aware that he's bracketing anthropological truths about human beings. He just asks how can we determine a social structure that would match our intuitions of "fairness" and thus pass muster as "just" even if we were to adopt the (false by the lights of anthropology) position of independent "reasonable people."

The important point is that Rawls is doing "ideal theory" or a "normative" philosophy. He's asking: how *should* society be structured to meet our intuitions of fairness and justice? (There's a question here about the historical construction of "our" intuitions, but let's let that go.) But, the realists would say, "how did we get in the mess we're in?" and "how do we get out of it?" are questions ideal theory doesn't ask, let alone answer. And, the realists continue, shouldn't we follow up the reading of history that helps us with those questions by consulting anthropology to see the variety of societies human beings have constructed? And, what if most people, most of the time, are not "reasonable" people, but are fundamentally intuitive, with reason being ex post facto rationalization? Shouldn't we then be looking to the bio-social subjectification practices of a society to see how those intuition-generating mechanisms have been constructed? And, in some cases, building a theory based on "reasonable" people is not going to get you far when you're dealing with a society that produces a number of fanatics, that is, people for whom it's a moral failing to accept reasonable, live and let live, liberal pluralism.

But, the reply might go, you have to know where you want to go (to justice) in order to successfully reform things. So why not have a dialogue between the ideal theory thought experiment people and the history / anthropology realists? This is the position of methodological pluralism: philosophy should be a big tent, or even, should have a division of labor.

In what disciplines has our social nature been overlooked? What picture of humans has been put in its place?

In the social sciences of law, economics, and political science, we find the rational utility maximizer or *homo economicus*. But this ignores our affective side as well our sociality.

1. NB: link of sociality and affect.
2. The real problem is that this "methodology has become a metaphysics." IOW, the allegedly descriptive assumptions of the model-builders have become a vision of ideal reality. Anything that detracts from this rational individuality is wrong, bad, a perversion of how things should be. So the (allegedly descriptive) assumptions then become policy prescriptions, so that neo-liberals experiment with social relations to see if they can force people to break their affective and social ties and become rational utility maximizers. The neo-liberals are the real "social engineers": it's time to call them what they are: radical experimenters with a false metaphysics.
3. This is of course a caricature – to some extent. "Utility" is purely descriptive: any consistent pattern of choice can be described as maximizing a function that can be labeled "utility." So "rational" here just means "consistent preference ordering when confronted with choices." And so the "utility" that is maximized doesn't have to be money; it can be selfless devotion to charity or revolution or art or philosophy or whatever. But it's individual in the sense that it's "my" selfless devotion to charity, etc. So you can have all the emotion you want in your decision-making, and as long as that decision-making is consistent, then you are rationally maximizing your utility.

However, and this is the key, "rational utility" often – surreptitiously, in practice, etc. – means "egotistic" utility in the sense that it maximizes my consumption of zero-sum goods. And that's a whole 'nother kettle of fish, opening up all sorts of questions of social conflict, ecological strain, etc.

It's the question of the commons as non-zero-sum (far from my getting better at philosophy depriving someone of the chance to get better at philosophy, there's a real sense in which my getting better at philosophy depends on other people getting better, and vice versa, in a "virtuous spiral") vs consumer goods as zero sum: my getting a really big car depletes the world's supply of steel so that your chance at getting a really big car is diminished (of course you can say that my buying a really big car is

going to feed back into production decisions that will increase the world's steel supply, but the ecological limits I think are where the bite is felt – the pollution caused by steel production is absorbed by the common ecological world and there are real limits there).

What is Veneer Theory? How is it associated with Dawkins?

Allied with original sin, it says we are "naturally" selfish and that morality is a cultural overlay. Dawkins will say it's genes that run the show, and they are amoral replicators. (But I don't even buy the way they construe "genetics." DST shows us we can see cultural evolution linked to biological evolution. There is no dichotomy between the two.)

What are the big problems with Veneer Theory?

1. It confuses proximate psychological motivations and ultimate genetic explanations.
2. It cannot explain how human morality is exempted from allegedly universal natural selfishness and competition.
3. IOW, it can't explain our evolution from amoral beasts to moral humans (52).

What did Kropotkin have to say?

We see lots of cooperation in nature. Darwinists focused too much on intragroup competition.

What did Darwin have to say about ethics? How does de Waal stand on the "unit of selection" issue?

Darwin recognized cooperation and expansion of sympathy beyond parent – child relations. He thought group selection was at work. De Waal thinks we don't need group selection and that kin selection and "reciprocal altruism" are enough.

Who was Westermarck and why is he important?

First to promote an integrated view of both animals and humans and both cultural and biological evolution ("culture and evolution" is how de Waal puts it). He's also important for emphasizing the sentimentalist tradition in morals (Hume) and for trying to define what is a "moral emotion" (disinterested concern with how "anyone" should be treated).

What is the Russian Doll model and how does empathy play a role in it?

Morality is seen as an outgrowth of animal sociality; this is a "bottom-up model." Empathy is a prime building block.

What are the different aspects or stages of empathy?

1. Emotional contagion: having same feeling as the other
 - a. Personal distress: selfishly seek to relieve your own distress (provoked by distress of others).
2. Empathy proper: being able to "know" what the other is feeling
 - a. Sympathy: being able to put yourself in the other's shoes. (Cf. Adam Smith quote on p. 31: "changing places in fancy with the sufferer.")

Why has empathy been missed in biological studies?

VERY IMPORTANT: p. 26: because of individualistic focus in biological studies. So tool use is seen as important mark of "intelligence" rather than social competence. There is a lot to say here about the "Tarzan" image of lots of cog sci that takes an evolutionary look: it's all about "solving problems posed by the environment." A solitary hunter is the implied model. Robin Dunbar is particularly scathing in diagnosing this. The problem of course, is that old-time hunting and fishing are intensely social activities: where to go, how to go about the hunt, how to distribute the results. Plus there tends to be a masculinist orientation. Current hunter-gatherers rely on female-produced food (fruits, nuts, seeds) for the majority of calories (though of course we can't allow modern vegetarian ethics to cloud the huge benefits of animal protein).

What is targeted helping? Why is it important?

Requires ability to see what the other needs (32).

What does consolation behavior require?

Self-other distinction (36).

How does the Russian doll model help us understand autism? How does ToM figure here?

Most accounts of autism equate it with failure to develop cognitive capacity of mind-reading or Theory Theory. But now some think autism is more of an affective problem, probably tied to a deficit in simulation of the other person's emotional state. We have also come across the "intense world" theory of autism while reading *Born for Love*.

Theory Theory versus Simulation Theory debate in ToM. That is, TT says we impute a mental state to others due to cognitive inference we do after gathering "evidence" from observation of the outside surface of the body of the other. Whereas ST says we do the imputation after an inference derived from observation of our internal state which simulates the inner state of the other.

But to me the whole thing is falsely posed: you don't need to figure out what's in someone's head, because most of the time the "meaning" of their actions is readable on their surface. ToM presupposes an inside / outside dichotomy that phenomenology shows isn't the case most of the time. IOW, the "location" of an emotion is not in the head, but on the face. You don't have to infer a private mental state for an emotion, bcs it's already publicly available. And that's bcs human ontology is not that of a collection of private mental spheres with outsides that need to be cognitively deciphered by others, but is fundamentally public, shared, and corporeally affective.

Why is gratitude a complex act?

Requires time lag, memory, and ability to recognize the individual benefactor.

How do expectations play a role in considerations of fairness? What social conditions are necessary?

FdW: You have to be able to expect a certain reward. You can't live in a despotic hierarchy, bcs then you expect to be treated unequally.

JP: This is very important. With DST, we have to fold cultural practices into our notion of evolution and development. So we are opened up to the investigation of politics and affect, as well as the question of revolution and "ideology." Why don't people revolt from conditions of inequality? They come to believe they get what they deserve, even if that is unequal. But this is not "ideology," if by that you mean they have the wrong ideas, that is, that they don't understand social reality, which is hidden from them by a veil of illusion. But this is way too cognitive. We have to deal with affective structure as it's embodied in corporeal upbringing. The real "German Ideology" Marx diagnosed is the idea that ideas are an important area to investigate. But Marx's problem was he focused too much on violence and coercion and not enough on embodied affective structure. Which is not to underplay the role of violence in human history! Recall the immortal words of the chapter on primitive accumulation: "And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire."

How is emotional contagion like a reflex? (51)

FdW: It comes over us from outside.

JP: Deleuze will push this and stress the independence of affect, its non-subjective, involuntary aspect. In the cinema books he'll talk about the ability of the close-up to capture "affect" as non-subjective, as environmental, if you will. There is something to this: we easily talk about the mood of a landscape (natural or artistic), the mood of a party or even of a conversation: it's between the people, it's independent of them. Which is not to say it would stay even if the people left (although some architecture captures affect the

way a landscape does). At least we can say the mood of a party or conversation is emergent and not a mere summation of individual moods? Now what about the affect of a painting? Can we say it is just the probability of triggering an emotion in an audience with a certain affective structure? But even then there's something that deserves ontological investigation: what is the mode of being of such an "emotional potential"? Isn't it precisely "virtual," i.e., capable of divergent actualization?

What is the relation of pure rationality and psychopathy?

Recall Damasio here. Affect and reason need to work together. Somatic markers produce affective tags for possible scenarios that cut down on decision space.

What is the "fragility" of morality?

It's being able to be expanded from in-group to universality. This expansion is subject to available resources.

De Waal says "loyalty" to group is itself a moral virtue. OK, maybe, but lots of questions here about nationalism (165). In what sense is a nation a group? Isn't nationalism parasitic on evolved feelings of (small) in-group loyalty. Aristotle called this *philia*; recall his limit on the size of a polis to about 5000 citizens (not total population of course: excluding women, children, slaves, and resident foreigners or *perioikoi*).

What is the "profound irony" linking war and morality (55)?

War served as selection pressure for socializing / subjectifying practices producing intense group loyalty.

De Waal, like many others, underplays in-group hierarchization: creation of warrior caste / class and attendant domination. Tie-in with agriculture and surplus allowing specialization. Cf Nietzsche and the cultural evolution of guilt.

How does de Waal marshal psychological evidence?

Cites Haidt on judgment-preceding intuitions; cites developmental psychology on early and reliable ontogeny of moral sentiments and capacities (spontaneous comforting of others) (55-57).

How does de Waal account for the overlooking of his continuist theory by evolutionary biology?

He calls it the Beethoven error: the idea that a cruel process can't produce morality, just like it's hard to see that B's messy apartment could be the site for his precise compositions. But if social cooperation helped fitness of ancestors, then it's easy to see selection pressure for cooperation.

But there can be “cooperation” in the sense of organized activity without “cooperation” in the sense of “free agreement to actions which benefit everyone.” Here we would have to talk about construction of differentiated social roles and the normativity of “flourishing.” (I’m not against normativity, but it needs a lot of careful discussion.)

What is the relation of behaviorism and anthropomorphism? How does it relate to the conflict between cognitive and evolutionary parsimony?

Behaviorism wanted a unified theory of psych for both animals and humans. But because of the problems with black-boxing human mind (66), behaviorism finally gave way to the cognitive revolution in human psychology (Kohlberg, etc.). But they then dug in their heels with regard to animals. But this creates an artificial duality in nature (cognitive humans and mechanical animals), which violated evolutionary parsimony.

What sort of anthropomorphism should be avoided? What sort is okay?

We shouldn't just project human emotions and intentions onto animals. But careful proposal of affective / cognitive abilities of animals for purposes of hypothesis formation is good, in fact, necessary.

Why is de Waal leery of notion of animal rights? What does he propose in its place?

He thinks they won't be real rights, bcs of the asymmetry of the animal / human relation. He proposes an ethic of care instead of animal rights. For the great apes, he proposes that all research be "mutually beneficial and enjoyable" (80).

He doesn't connect the dots and criticize rights as rationalistic and individualistic, when his whole approach is to stress affect social interconnection. The challenge, as he states, is to expand our partial affective loyalty from in-group, to all humans, to human-like animals. (This is Hume's starting point: it's not that humans are egoists: it's that we are partial to small groups: kin, friends, neighbors).

ROBERT WRIGHT

What are the two types of anthropomorphic language? What is de Waal's error in Wright's opinion?

He credits animals with too much cognitive capacities when emotional regulation is probably enough (91-92). The key is that "many emotions are proxies for strategic calculation" (87).

What are the problems with Wright's formulation on p 87? "According to evolutionary psychology, human emotions were 'designed' by natural selection to serve the strategic interests of individual human beings (or more precisely, to further the proliferation of the individual's genes in the environment of our evolution—but for purposes of this discussion we can assume the interests of the individual and of the individual's genes align, as they often do.)"

This crude, as so much EP is. First of all, he doesn't distinguish basic emotions from social emotions. Secondly, he thus assumes massive modularity even for advanced social emotions. Third, he has assumed individual gene selectionism (Dawkins and the "selfish gene"). But surely with social emotions we have to factor in cultural inputs. But he can't because he neglects DST perspective which would include cultural factors in individual ontogeny. Instead he has classic Dawkins selfish gene notion, complete with notion of interests of genes, which Joyce demolished.

How does Wright define Veneer Theory and what is his alternative?

He sets up dichotomy between VT w/ morality as cultural overlay and "naturalistic" idea that "our moral impulses are rooted in our genes."

But again, this is laughably crude, given a DST perspective. It's Wright's simple-minded selfish gene notion that sets up his whole bit about how "our moral judgments are subtly and pervasively colored by emotionally mediated self-interest" (93). This is key to his theory on 95 about "systematic 'corruption'" whereby emotional self-interest interferes with moral / rational universality.

But this is vulgar use of "genes" to naturalize capitalist individualism (to be equally crude – more subtly, he overlooks study of how cultural embodiment via subjectification practices has a wide leeway along the autonomy / community axis.)

How does Wright botch Haidt and the affective research tradition on 95 when he says "our moral judgments, though reached through a seemingly conscious and rational process of deliberation – a cognitive process – can be biased subtly by emotional factors"?

First of all, Haidt shows that affect leads to intuition which leads to judgment and that rationalization is ex post facto (in most cases). It is true that there is a retrospective, wag the dog, illusion that reason is what generates judgment, but that is an illusion in most cases. It is also true that when philosophers do moral reasoning leading to a judgment (a rare occurrence), then they might be prey to unconscious biases.

Anyway, the real problem is Wright's unquestioning individualism. De Waal's whole point is that much affect is social, not individual. It's only a confusion of proximate psychological motivation and ultimate genetic explanation (and an unquestioning

individualism on the genetic level) that leads to Wright's idea that morality is purely cognitive universalism and that emotion is biasing or corrupting individualism.

The Humean problem is that moral sentiments are partial, not individualist / egoist. You can't escape the prison of psychological egoism (remember this can be emotional proxies producing unconscious bias as well as conscious calculation) rooted in genetic individualism (altruism is just hypocrisy for the true egoist). But you can expand a partial, but already social, affective structure.

CHRISTINE KORSGAARD

What are Korsgaard's main points against VT?

1. That the principle of self-interest is not proven to be an effective principle of practical reason. IOW, that it's not effective in actually getting your way.
2. That the idea of self-interest is coherent for a social animal like humans.
3. That most of us don't in fact have to struggle to act in a moral manner. Only psychopaths have to restrain rampant self-interest.
4. It's absurd to think non-human animals act in their self-interest. This requires a cognitive sophistication we can't assume they have.

Why do her objections miss the point?

VT is not just an intellectual position "popular in the social sciences" (100). For one thing, it is used for policy proposals. That's because the "social sciences" are completely taken up in more or less transparent power relations with contemporary capitalism. The idea the economics is an intellectual pursuit, that it is a "science" the way physics is a science (leaving aside the difficult question of the social context of physics!), is absurdly naïve. A glance at the history of the "Chicago School" (Chile, etc.) should be enough.

Where does Korsgaard locate the discontinuity btw humans and other animals?

Positive characteristics: "...elaborate cultures, historical memory, languages ... art, literature, science, philosophy ... jokes ... our ability to make friends across the boundaries between species" (104).

Negative characteristics: "we seem to be psychologically damaged" (104).

Why does Korsgaard not think morality is a matter of the content of intentions? How does this restrict morality to humans? (107)

Because animal goals are given by affective states. That means they are determined, not free (110). Freedom and morality go together with rationality as ability to judge your goals, or “normative self-government” (112). This requires self-consciousness, i.e., knowledge of grounds of action as grounds (113). This is unique to humans (116).

PHILIP KITCHER

What is the alliance btw Darwin and Hume? Why is it a “lure”?

Moral sentiments grounded in animal prosociality. It’s a lure bcs it underestimates the complexity of psychological altruism (128-9). Note the notion of a multi-dimensional “altruism space” (129).

What is the difference btw animal altruism and human moral practices?

Moral emotions have to be expanded to include all humanity; animals can’t universalize like that (132-133).

What are “wantons”?

Creatures governed by the most powerful impulse, whatever that is at the moment (136).

What is Kitcher’s story about evolution of morality?

Linguistic ability to share formulation and evaluation of plans leads us to regulate conduct of small groups. Then came a process of cultural evolution (variation in sets of socializing practices), with reproductive success or “smoother societies, greater harmony, and increased cooperation” as selection pressures (136-7). This leads to development of capacity for “normative guidance—perhaps understood in that enlargement and refinement of sympathy that gives rise to Smith’s impartial spectator” (137-8).

This is still pretty naïve. It doesn’t account for war as selection pressure, nor for big break that agriculture and class society makes in different war practices (co-evolution). Thus it doesn’t account for internal hierarchies. To make a society efficient, smooth, harmonious, etc, can mean all sorts of violence and unequal distributions, when it has to be good at war.

PETER SINGER

How does Singer nuance de Waal's reading of Greene?

He shows that a few people are able to do utilitarian / rational judgments in the "hot" / personal version of the trolley problem. This means they have to use reason to over-ride emotional tug towards deontology (147-48). Oddly, this puts us on Kant's side after all (150).

What is Singer's position about rights with regard to moral obligations?

Rights are not the foundation of our moral obligations. They are instead founded on "concern for the interests of all those affected by our actions" (154).

How does he deal with de Waal's concern about the asymmetrical relation involved in the human granting to rights to animals?

He's not that worried, because we grant rights in other asymmetrical relations (children, severely intellectually disabled). It's suffering that counts for Singer, not intellect.

What about the case of the great apes?

Singer is willing to grant them special rights bcs of their closeness to humans, in the hopes that it could lead to better treatment for all animals (158).

DE WAAL'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTATORS

What is the core concern of morality for de Waal?

Constraints on actions that could hurt or help others; "often places common good above individual interests." The rest is just "social convention" (162).

What about loyalty and available resources?

This is the Humean challenge of expanding partiality.

Where does de Waal locate the discontinuity btw animals and humans?

In middle of second level of his "Tower of Morality."

Where does he underplay intra-group hierarchy?

P. 173: “morality strengthens a cooperative society from which everyone benefits and to which most are prepared to contribute.” We’ve been over this point several times before. It’s simply not the case that most social systems after agriculture have been “cooperative society from which everyone benefits”! Most have condemned the vast majority to serfdom if not slavery. Some sort of religious world view justifying the hierarchy is scant consolation, no matter how deeply embodied these can be. The need to resort of violence, the need for the iron fist inside the glove of embodied culture (a horrible mixed metaphor, I’ll agree!), is all too evident in history.

Where do we see the key to the reality of “Veneer Theory”?

In the footnote to 176, where we see it’s not a “theory” so much as source of policy. De Waal writes: “even if all that was demonstrated was that one can create a situation in which chimpanzees consider the welfare of others secondary.” But that’s exactly all that neo-liberal policies do: they create the condition whereby RCT presuppositions are fulfilled, where rational individual utility maximization is the only way to survive.

What is de Waal’s final point?

Morality builds on nature; it doesn’t fight it (181).